

The Forming Process of Creativity: A (Self-)Communication Framework

When and how do humans think and behave creatively? Creativity as a research topic has been of interest to scholars across disciplines. Domains such as education and human development concern creativity as a critical capability (Henriksen et al., 2018), whereas psychologists are interested in the neuro-cognitive functionality of creativity (Lhommée et al., 2014). In addition, recent advancement in artificial intelligence (AI) has also brought attention to computer scientists to explore the enigma of creativity (Lake et al., 2017). However, despite the efforts paid from multiple disciplines, what we know about creativity remains sparse and limited. Up to date, scholars may not even be able to answer some of the most fundamental questions about creativity, including – *What does creativity mean?* In this regard, the current study aims to understand the meaning of creativity through the perspectives of online content consumers.

Specifically, there are several reasons why I approach the research question through the lens of content consumers. In a review of former literature, existing definitions of creativity are mostly research- or expert-driven, and the primary way to study creativity is to recruit participants to conduct certain "creativity tests" and to measure their performance in these tasks. However, these approaches are distant from our experience of creativity in real life. In reality, we do not assess how creative a person is by whether s/he can solve the classic candle problem (Weisberg, 1988) or how well s/he performs in Torrance's divergent thinking test (Torrance, 1972). Instead, we look at their ideas and work. In other words, the notion of creativity does not arise until a third person evaluates a piece of creative content. In addition, creativity is a unique concept that exists across contemporary human societies. As a result, to conceptualize creativity using a single definition may be extremely challenging, since every individual may define

creativity widely differently, and some may not even hold a definition for the term.

Alternatively, the current study proposes to study creativity as a social meaning and discuss how the meaning is formed through a sense-making process (Manning, 2013; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). In this regard, the present research naturally develops an interest in how the meaning of creativity is formed among people who consume creative content. And, while not everyone has frequent access to creative content in formal venues such as museums and galleries, the use of online platforms to access content has become a pervasive practice of the general public. Therefore, in the present research, I study the meaning-making of creativity among online content consumers.

Background and Literature Review

Across the fields, scholars frequently approach the definition of creativity through either one of the two following methods (e.g., Wang et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2008; Guegan et al., 2016; Mesiti et al., 2019). On one hand, they commonly refer to Sternberg and Lubart's remark (1998) of creativity, considering novelty and appropriateness (or usefulness in practical applications) as the essential features of creativity. Other literature attempted to understand the nature of creativity through its measurements, such as *fluency* (i.e., the total count of ideas generated in a creative task), *originality* (i.e., the rarity of an idea, often calculated by the within-group probability of an idea's occurrence), and *divergence* or *flexibility* (i.e., the extent to which an individual is capable of stretching from one domain to another between ideas, often evaluated through the Torrance divergent thinking task) (Hocevar, 1981; Runco & Jaeger, 2012). However, considering its complex nature, these conceptual constructs alone may not be sufficient to represent creativity comprehensively. Moreover, scholars mostly attained these features of creativity through quantitative experiments, which typically asked participants to

perform standard creativity tests in a lab and measured their test performance and these variables accordingly. At best, we can say these features are related to one's creative ability, but they tell very little about the nature and meaning of creativity. Besides, these approaches to creativity research are not only remote from our day-to-day experience of creativity, but they are also largely driven by scholars and experts' perspectives to serve research purposes.

Instead of understanding creativity through a single definition or a standardized measurement, the current study proposes to study creativity through a more qualitative approach. In social science studying topics that are fluid in nature, such as gender, sexuality, community culture, or social norms, scholars often focus on the process of how meanings are formed and made sense of within a society or a certain group of individuals (Thibault, 1990). I consider the approach is particularly appropriate for the present study, as creativity is not a single state that can be quantified nor described through terse, verbal definition. Alternatively, considering creativity as a concept exists within and across modern societies, the current study is interested in how the meaning-making process of creativity is formed through the audience's content consumption experience. Accordingly, I propose the research question of the current study as follows:

RQ: *What does creativity mean from the perspective of online content consumers? How is the meaning-making process of creativity formed through the consumption and evaluation experience of online content consumers?*

To the best of my knowledge, one of the most relevant literature, in terms of both topic and method, is McStay's qualitative study (2010) concerning online audience's perception toward creativity in online advertising. Though the study focused more specifically on how creative advertisements influence the trust, relevance, and attitude of consumers, and thus, did

not directly study the meaning of creativity among the online audience, the study did support that a ground-up, qualitative approach to creativity research through general audience's perspectives can be successful. Additionally, the study offers several remarks for the current research design. Specifically, to encourage individuals to address the abstract nature of creativity, it is particularly useful to include concrete examples for them to elaborate on. Besides, given that not all participants may come to the study with a concrete definition for creativity nor creative content in mind, it may be more plausible to adopt an indirect path for data selection. This is why the current study exploits a series of focus groups as its primary methodology, which I will further address in the following Method section.

Method

Focus Groups

To study the meaning of creativity among the online audience, the current study conducted a series of online focus groups. I consider focus groups were a particularly appropriate form of research for the current topic for two major reasons. The first, despite their constant exposure to create content online, I do not expect all participants to have in mind a specific definition of creativity. Therefore, a more direct approach for data collection, such as a structured interview, may not attain fruitful insights from participants. In comparison, focus groups have commonly been used in social science research to reveal a complex, subtle social phenomenon, since themes, perspectives, and counterviewpoints can often arise through dialogues among group members (Lundt & Livingstone, 1996; Morgan, 1998). Additionally, the formation of meaning per se has been considered as a process of social interaction in social science research (Manning, 2013; Lingel & Golub, 2015). Through interacting with others in the

same focus group, participants were as well prompted to elaborate and reflect more deeply regarding the meaning of creativity in their own day-to-day online browsing experience.

The focus group session asked each participant to search online a piece of creative content and share it with their groupmates. They were then asked to discuss and select one of the most creative contents among what everyone found. The study procedure was designed as such for a few reasons. The first, by asking participants to search online for creative content, the task not only prompted participants to start thinking about "what can be creative?" but also offered them concrete examples to address in the later discussion session. Secondly, by instructing participants to compare their choices of creative content, I attempted to encourage them to elaborate on their criteria for evaluating creative content. Third, the study instruction allows participants to share any type of online content; in results, they found and shared content ranging from YouTube videos, web design, product design, illustrations, infographics, and more. Without restricting participants' choices of content type, I not only intend to prompts participants to discuss creative content as a domain-general instead of a domain-specific topic, but I am also interested in their cross-platform and cross-medium comparison of creative content. All in all, the purpose of adopting focus groups as the current methodological approach is not to directly obtain a "definition" of creativity from participants, but rather, through interaction and discussion with other participants, I attempt to extract the conceptual constructs of creativity from these online content consumers.

After each focus group discussion, participants were asked to respond to a few questions in individual interviews. In particular, the individual interviews were adopted to accomplish triangulation in the current research. As a result, participants were encouraged to share their

perspectives toward creativity and creative content both through social interaction with others and through their personal reflection.

Participants

Between April and May of 2020, I recruited in total 44 participants and conducted fourteen focus groups, ranging in group size from two to five participants in each group. The group size was designed based on a review of former literature. Specifically, referring to former literature (Bird, 2003; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011; Morgan, 1998), I originally designed the group size to range between three to four participants per group, while participants' absence or rescheduling resulted in a slight variation in group sizes. All participants are recruited through the SONA study participation system at the Communication and Information Science Department at Cornell University. Participants received course credits to compensate their time, and the only criterion for sample exclusion was participants have to be at least 18 years of age. The study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Cornell University.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25. Despite recruited entirely from a student population, participants of the current study serve as a rather representative sample for the purpose of the current research. Since the present study is interested in the general online audience's view of creative content and the meaning of creativity, individuals of the particular age range consist of one of the most active groups of digital content consumers (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010). Besides, due to the recruitment channel for the current study, the majority of participants are students studying communication and/or information science, who not only have extensive exposure to online content through course materials but also adopt the common practice of searching content online for both casual and professional purposes. This feature of the participants will be further addressed in the Results section.

Additionally, to ensure the formation of each group includes a certain degree of dynamics, I assigned participants to either homogeneous or heterogeneous groups by their gender identity. To achieve this, I sent out a pre-study survey to capture the demographic data of participants. The survey asked participants to recruit their age, gender identity, ethnicity, major subjects, and years in school. To capture gender identity as a qualitative feature, I use a continuous dragging scale in the survey, instead of asking participants to choose from a set of discrete options in a multiple-choice question, which is commonly implemented in quantitative studies. All except two participants identified themselves as purely male or purely female (i.e., dragging the scale to either of the two extremes). In results, focus groups in the current study include homogeneous groups that were all female or all male participants as well as heterogeneous groups that were consist of female, male, and mixed identity participants.

Study Procedure and Data Collection

The study procedure is described as follows. All focus groups in the current study were conducted online via the video conferencing application, Zoom, due to the worldwide pandemic during the study period. Participants accessed a virtual Zoom meeting to participate in their assigned time slot for their focus group discussion. A researcher was present at each Zoom meeting to provide step-by-step instructions throughout the focus group study. Implied consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of each study session. The first step of the study asked participants to spend around 5 to 10 minutes searching online for a piece of creative content. All except for one participant were able to complete the task under 5 minutes, where only one participant took up to 7 minutes. Following, participants were told to share what they found by sending the URL link to the piece of content in the virtual chatroom of the Zoom meeting. They were then asked to describe what they found to their groupmates and discussed

collectively to choose one of the most creative content among everyone's contributions.

Participants were given 15 minutes to conduct this part of the discussion. During this part of the study, the researcher would leave the Zoom meeting to minimize her intervention throughout the discussion. After 15 minutes, the research personnel would rejoin the meeting and asked participants to share their discussion results. In the last part of the study, participants would each be assigned to a breakout room, where the research personnel would speak with each of them individually to ask a series of follow-up interview questions as described below. In the original research design, I included only the first three questions. Questions 4 and 5 were added to the individual interview due to emerging themes revealed from participants' focus group discussion and their individual interviews. Each of the individual interviews lasts for 5 minutes.

1. Please briefly describe your search process through which you found the piece of creative content. Is it something that came immediately to your mind? Or, how did you eventually find the piece of content?
2. While you were searching online for a piece of creative content, do you have in mind what does creativity mean to you?
3. While you were searching online, how tell whether a piece of content is *not* creative?
4. Would you consider yourself as a content creator? Based on your former experience in creating content, do you think the amount of time, efforts, and work being put into a piece of work has anything to do with the level of creativity?
5. Whenever you encounter a piece of creative content, do you think it sparks any emotions or feelings inside you?

Worth noting, all the instructions offered in the current study (including the series of questions asked in the individual interviews) were presented in a sequential fashion. That is,

participants did not know ahead of time what they would be asked to do or to answer next. For instance, participants do not know they would be comparing their selection of creative content with others while they were searching online. Through this methodological approach, I intend to maintain a certain degree of naturalistic throughout the study. In other words, participants were not searching a piece of content for the purpose of demonstration nor for competition with others. Rather, they were more naturally looking up for a piece of example they personally considered as creative.

All data were collected through video recording of the entire focus group discussion and individual interview processes. Though the current study does not analyze participants' non-verbal behaviors throughout the study, video recording was chosen as the format of data selection simply for the ease and clarity to identify participants in data analysis.

Data Analysis

Based on Glaser and Strauss' Grounded Theory (1967), I focused on formulating a framework for the meaning-making process of creativity through data analysis of the current study, instead of testing any existing hypothesis or theory in former creativity research. All recorded videos of the study processes were transcribed using Otto.ai. Additionally, the researcher watched all footages again and took notes of the participants' conversation. Using both transcriptions and notes of the recorded videos, I performed an open coding method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to first summarized participants' quotes into units of incidents and classified them into several categories. Applying an inductive method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I revisited and connected transcriptions to identify recurring themes. Specifically, I drew from Lofland et al.'s notions on the formation of social meanings through cognitive, emotional, and hierarchical

aspects to formulate the granular incidents and categories into coherent themes, which I will discuss further in the next section.

Findings

Overview

Overall, the current research design was able to successfully prompt participants' discussion over the meaning of creativity and their approaches to evaluate creative content. All of the focus groups either specifically carried out discussion regarding how each participant would define creativity or elaborated how they would evaluate creative content. Without restricting the type of content for discussion, the study design was able to, as planned, encourage cross-medium comparison and discussion of creativity across domains. In particular, participants' meaning-making of creativity can be summarized into the following four themes.

Sensory Stimuli

The first emerging theme suggests a piece of content should be able to capture the audience's attention in order to be considered creative. Throughout the study, participants often described that creative content “captures my eyes,” “pops,” and “stands out.” Though a piece of sensory-stimulating content does not ensure a high level of creativity, all creative works were able to elicit participants' attention through visual, audio, or a combination of multiple senses. For instance, this can include the use of colors with a high level of brightness or contrast, a visual composition with a dominating subject, or a presentation of moving over still images. This can be reflected in one of the participants' quotes, suggesting:

“If I vision a piece of creative content in my head, it’s in bright yellow or red.”

Additionally, these sensory stimuli are described as essential to form the impression of creative content for two major reasons. The first, due to the cluttering nature of the contemporary

digital landscape, a piece of work cannot stand out from the crowd if it is not even able to capture an audience's attention. Especially, the digital natives have long formed the tendency to browse online content in a speedy fashion. In fact, participants admitted that, even when they were asked to search for a piece of creative work, they were more likely to skim through online content rather digesting them carefully. Without a stimulating signal that captures one's attention, it is ultimately unlikely for participants to spend more time consuming a piece of work and considering whether it qualified as creative content before continuing their scanning flow. The second, highly stimulating sensory elements were said to typically contribute to the uniqueness and unexpectedness of a work. Conceptually, this phenomenon was also captured through some common phrasing in participants' quotes that are used to describe creative content, such as "extraordinary," "stunning," and "appealing."

Heuristic Criteria

Despite the complex nature of creativity, participants tended to exploit a handful of quick, heuristic rules to distinguish whether a piece of content is creative or not. Some of these criteria may largely be based on subjective judgments, but participants also come to several agreements on some objective, universal guidelines for shaping these criteria to evaluate creativity. In particular, there are three rules that were commonly mentioned throughout the study. The first rule is whether participants have seen a piece of content before. In other words, participants tended to draw on their personal experience to determine whether a piece of work is creative. However, participants also suggested that an "unseen" piece of content does not indicate all elements in its composition are entirely novel to them. In fact, a piece of creative content can also be produced by making some twists to a common object. For instance, one participant suggested:

"We all have seen the Eiffel Tower before. I mean, the typical photo of the Eiffel Tower that sits behind a plaza and in the center of the city. Like what you would typically see on a tourist guide. That, of course, is not creative. But, if you ... let's say, take the photo and make some after-production and photo editing to make it like installation art, I think that can also be creative."

The second rule is highly related to the abovementioned theme of sensory stimuli.

According to participants' focus group discussions and individual interviews, in order to capture individuals' attention in any digital space, there are certain medium types that fundamentally allow a greater degree of creativity. For instance, a 3D animation with a story plot, background music, and after-effects through video editing is said to be more creative than a music soundtrack alone or the visual design of a still image. Furthermore, participants suggested that the notion of creativity has conventionally been tied with areas such as fine art and visual design, and thus, creative content is stereotypically associated with media that are "on the 2D surface," such as painting on canvas, sketching on paper, or an illustration on the screen. Therefore, if a piece of content can integrate experiences beyond the two-dimensional space, it can already capture a greater degree of the audience's interests and can more likely be viewed as more creative.

In addition, participants commonly believed that to work on medium types that include multiple sensory experiences, a content creator has to dedicate a greater degree of work and more consideration for details. This leads to the third heuristic rule for identifying a piece of creative content: "Can I think of and make the work myself or not?" Specifically, this criterion involves two layers of considerations – whether an audience can think of a topic and design its content details and whether the person can execute the production. In this regard, participants have come to the consensus that creative content is so precious and worth appreciation because it requires a

high level of planning, integration, and organization to enable rich experiences to stream across multiple modalities, and not everyone is capable of managing the amount of thought and work. In one focus group, participants attempted to compare a music video to a music soundtrack. Their discussion suggested that to produce a video, there need to be more considerations for choosing the characters and costumes, setting up the background, matching up the visual with the audio, and “the more work that got put into the video was what made it stands out.”

In response to this recurring perspective that was commonly brought up by participants, I added a question in the individual interview and specifically asked participants whether they believe the greater amount of time and work dedicated to design and production contributes to a greater degree of creativity. In general, participants agreed with this statement and addressed that the amount of “work” put into creation indicates the more ideas being embedded into a piece of content. Nonetheless, participants did not come to a consensus regarding time commitment and creativity. On one hand, some believed that creative work takes time, and a long working process of content production allows continual improvement and refinement of its quality. On the other hand, some participants argued that inspiration also can occur within a fairly short period, and thus, rather than time, the amount of thoughts and considerations is more relevant to the level of creativity. In particular, one participant’s quote summarizes the above counterviewpoints:

“I know, in fact, a lot (of) paintings just take a few strokes. They were done in such a short amount of time, but they can still be extremely creative. But yeah, I do think time and effort is important. But also, it's more about how passionate you are and how much of your *soul* you put into the piece that you make. I think the amount of work, efforts, or work you put into a piece of work are like small pieces of your soul. And they mean

something to you. And I think that's where the difference lies in whether I find something (is) creative or not.”

Cognitive Elaboration

Besides sensory and heuristic experience, creative content is also said to motivate deep, retrospective elaboration among its audience. In response to the cognitive, elaborative aspect of creativity, participants suggested that creative content carries either meanings or stories with it, and most importantly, the *purpose* of a piece of work determines its level of creativity. These meanings and purposes typically motivate the rationales behind how a piece of work is created, and eventually, these relatable connections can be conveyed to the audience. For instance, a participant provided further explanations of this notion in the quote below:

“People, like designers or producers, they don’t simply do anything they like to produce a (piece of) creative work. You can probably say that’s art, but creativity is another thing. You can usually tell what people are trying to do, and there are usually some good reasons behind what they do... Well, not always at the beginning. Like, I really enjoy watching creative advertisements. You can’t always immediately tell what the product (is) that they are trying to sell, but toward the end, you just get it. You can get the reason and the meaning behind the story plot. And, the moment when you figure these all out, I think that’s when you realize ‘Oh, this is really creative!’”

Additionally, throughout the study, participants frequently utilized the phrase “re-purposing” to describe how creative content shapes its cognitive meaning. That is, creative content oftentimes offers a new purpose to how a subject can be used, viewed, or interpreted. Conversely, if a piece of content cannot deliver its purpose clearly to the audience, it can hardly

be perceived as creative. since the value of the work would remain at its sensory level, and the audience's experience of the content would not be comprehensive.

Under this coherent theme, one discussion topic that repeatedly occurred throughout the study was the comparison between originality and creativity. In particular, participants differentiated the two concepts and considered that creative content needs not to be original. To be more specific, participants conceptualize originality as the ability to create an entirely new item from the ground up. In other words, the creation of original work is often described as "out of the blue" or "building from scratch." Indeed, participants admitted that some groundbreaking creative work can be entirely original, where content creators established a brand-new idea or protocol. However, participants also argued that a lot of creative work can be built on top of existing work or one's prior knowledge, and they admitted that a wide range of mundane objects can as well be utilized as the base of creative products. In fact, some proposed that if a creator can redefine and modify an ordinary object accordingly, the audience may consider the work as even more creative, since the creator is working on a creative product out of unexpected space. For instance, among one of the creative contents, a participant shared, a video recorded how a designer made a piece of fashionable clothing using an old, recycled sofa. In their discussion, participants all agreed that the content is highly creative; even though the clothing and the sofa may be far from originality, the designer was able to transform the purpose and usage of these items from the mundane.

Last but not least, the cognitive aspect of creativity denotes bidirectional contributions from both the content creator and the audience. Specifically, while the content creator possesses and integrates certain meanings and purposes to the production of a piece of work, the audience may interpret them in a wide variety of ways. According to the participants, it is through this

diversifying process that the audience continuously adds and enriches the meanings of a piece of work. In other others, creative content differentiates from other ordinary counterparts by offering the potential for its cognitive elaboration to evolve in an endless fashion.

Emotional Influences

The fourth theme that emerged from the study concerns how creative content influences its audience. Most coherently, participants suggested that creative content to elicit some common emotional reactions among them. In general, these emotions are mostly positive, as participants often find themselves feeling excited, surprised, and interested when they encounter a piece of creative content. Moreover, most participants specified that they felt happy when they see creative work, regardless of the content per se. That is, even when the content presents a negative tone, such as a sad song, or a horrifying clip, the experience of discovering creativity still brings them a certain degree of joy.

In particular, there are few emotions clearly reflect the above-mentioned heuristic rule, based on which participants evaluate the degree of creativity in a piece of work by whether they can as well think of and produce the content. In this regard, participants responded that inspiration and appreciation are some typical reactions they have at the encounter of creative content. Interestingly, some participants admitted that these reactions may not typically be considered as “emotions,” the sense of inspiration and appreciation tend to reveal more emotionally and positively, rather than neutrally. Besides, some participants disclosed that, at the moment when they realize the meaning and purposes behind a piece of creative work, this realization often comes along with a certain degree of enviousness, since they wish they would have thought of such an innovative idea if they were given the same topic to work on. For instance, a participant's quote below clearly reflects this subtle response in one's emotions:

“Yeah, I would say that it (i.e., encountering a piece of creative content) sparks some feelings. It’s usually the feelings of being impressed. Sometimes, I am probably even a little jealous. Like, if it’s about something I tend to work on, and someone else came up with something really creative that I didn’t think of, my first reaction would probably be “Oh, yeah, it can also be creative in this way!” I might feel, um, envious. I just wish I would have thought of the same thing.”

The Forming Process of Creativity

Through an inductive method, I connect these coherent themes across all focus groups and find that participants tend to adopt these aspects of evaluation and meaning-making for creativity in a sequential fashion. More specifically, an experiential journey to consume a piece of creative content is typically initiated by an individual's attention being captured by the sensory stimuli elicited by the work. Once the person's interest is caught up by the work, s/he tends to perform some quick judgment toward the content with a variety of heuristic cues, such as the type of medium or the level of sophistication in production. In addition, the viewer's personal experience may also be applied to serve an evaluative function in this stage, such as whether the person has seen similar work before, or whether the person can easily think of or produce the same work. The next, a piece of truly creative work differentiates itself by offering a new meaning or purpose to an existing subject. Moreover, the degree to which it can inspire the audience to reflect rich cognitive elaboration determines whether the value of the content can continue to evolve. Finally, creativity produces lasting emotional influences on its consumers, where they are likely to reflect positive emotions, such as excitement and surprise, regardless of the emotional atmosphere embedded in the content. Besides, some may also demonstrate a slight touch of enviousness, as the encounter of creative content makes them wonder why they could

not have thought of the same innovative idea. In summary, the current study reveals a forming process of creativity while individuals consume online content. I illustrate this process in Figure 1, where the phases from left to right denote the common progression of how the notion of creativity arises from an audience's experience. Moreover, each of the themes is essential to the formation of creative perception. That is, without any of these themes, the experience to perceive creativity would not be comprehensive, and thus, a content consumer may be less likely to consider the piece of work as creative.

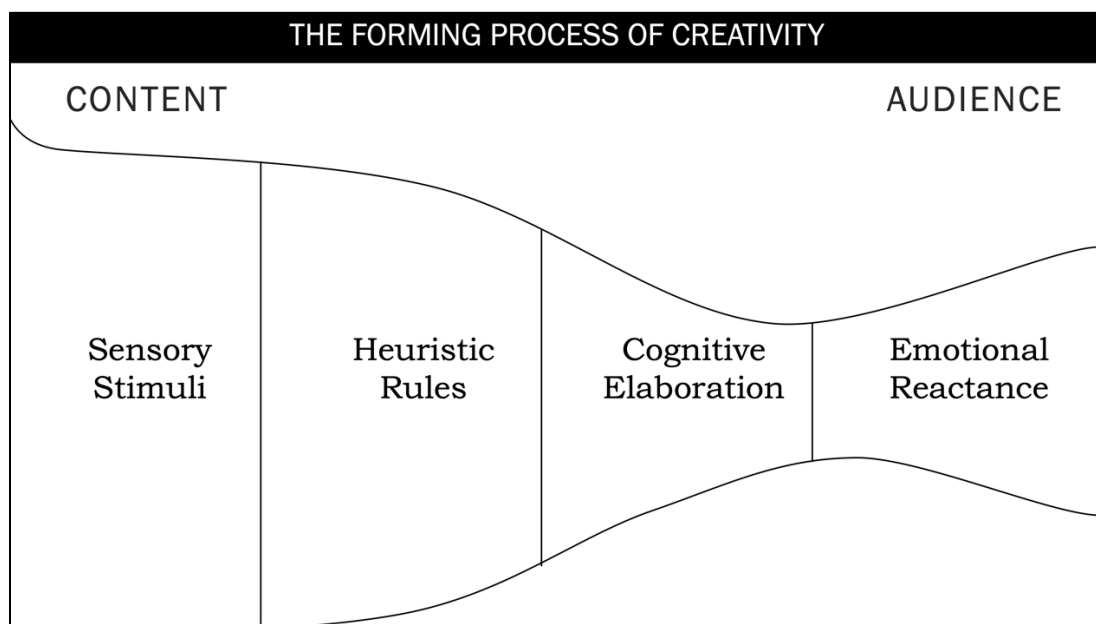


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the present research findings.

Besides, I purposefully illustrate the framework in this unique funnel shape. The wider scope on the earlier stages of this process (i.e., sensory stimuli and heuristic rules) denotes that the audience can be stimulated through a wide variety of sensory cues and can adopt a great number of heuristic rules to evaluate a piece of work. In fact, participants suggested that the possibilities here are nearly infinite. For instance, an individual can attend to ultimately any sensory cues on a piece of work, and the types of stimulating elements can be widely different depends on the type of medium and platform the person consumes the piece of work. However,

when it comes to the cognitive elaboration of content, participants focus narrowly on the meaning and purpose that a piece of work serves. Following, the types of emotional reactions tend to diversify, but they may limit to more positive emotions that include a sense of excitement and unexpectedness. Based on this framework, there are two perspectives I would like to further elaborate.

A dialogue between the content and its audience.

As mentioned above, the meaning-making process of creativity involves contributions from both the content and its audience. From another perspective, the phenomenon can be viewed as a constant dialogue between the two parties. When a piece of content creates sensory stimuli, the audience tune to them with attention. When the content presents itself through certain medium and presentation approaches, the audience evaluates them using heuristic judgments. While the content conveys elaborative purposes and meanings, the audience reflects them with their unique interpretations. And finally, when a creative piece of work truly speaks to the audience, it makes an emotional impact on the content recipients. All in all, the forming process of creativity is bilateral and communicative. Each creative work carries certain messages to be delivered to its audience. Therefore, the aesthetic and presentation of a work can not only capture one's attention but more importantly, they serve to deliver the meaning and purpose behind the content, which fundamentally differentiates a piece of creative work from the ordinary. If the core message cannot be conveyed or an interpretation is not elicited on the audience side, the communication process is not formed, and the notion of creativity cannot be perceived.

The roles of content creators and content consumers.

The roles of content creators and content consumers have frequently been brought up throughout the study. A question that arises naturally is whether the two different roles affect

participants' responses to the meaning-making of creativity. The response to this question is negative, and participants offered explanations as follows. First, the borderline between the two roles has become so blurred that essentially, as part of the online content community, everyone involves in a certain degree of content creation and consumption. Though participants who identify themselves as professional content creators or, at least, with the attempt to pursue a career of content creation, may possess more insights into the working process of creative production, they suggested that the approaches to which they would evaluate their products versus others' work online are fairly identical. Furthermore, they suggested that, even when examining their own work as content creators, they tend to put themselves in the audience position during evaluation. As one participant explicitly mentioned, "you are your first audience when you created a piece of work."

Discussion

Methodological Reflection

As mentioned above, the research design turned out to successfully capture the meaning-making of creativity among participants' experience in online content consumption. In particular, focus group discussion served as an indirect approach to effectively prompt participants' consideration for the meaning of creativity. While all participants did discuss the meaning, evaluation, and even explicit definition of creativity, these results greatly support the validity of the current study. Additionally, there is a minimal amount of groupthink (i.e., one participant dominating the conversation throughout a focus group session), which greatly enhances the reliability of the study, as participants were able to freely shape and express their opinions through social interaction with others. Limiting the group size of each focus group greatly enhances the quality of the study. In particular, the size of three participants per group typically

generates the richest discussion, whereas when the group size reaches five individuals, the quality of discussion started to diminish. The generalizability of the current study is also accomplished through various approaches. While the study instructions did not restrict participants to share and discuss the creative content of a certain type, participants were not only encouraged to perform a cross-medium and cross-platform comparison, but they also discussed various aspects of creativity from a domain-general perspective.

Originally, the research design assigned participants into heterogeneous and homogeneous groups to examine whether group dynamics generate various discussion outcomes. Though this phenomenon was not observed in the current study, I would like to specify two reasons that may lead to this result. The first, considering the age range of the current sample, since as all participants are digital natives, their wide exposure to online content does not differ by their gender. Particularly, as they are mostly students from the Communication and Information Science Department, all have them have formed a strong tendency to consume content online for inspiration, exploration, and other course-related purposes. This also leads to a limitation of the current study, where the current sample is formed dominantly by female participants. Therefore, while the demographic formation of focus groups did not seem to generate distinguishable outcomes, this result may also be due to the lack of male and mixed-identity participants.

Creativity as a Process

The primary contribution of the current study is to reveal the meaning of creativity from the content consumers' perspectives. Different from how former research-driven, expert-driven definition of creativity, which tends to view creativity as the outcome of content, the current research findings suggested individuals form the meaning of creativity progressively during

content consumption. In addition, the experience of consuming creative content is considered as a form of communication, where both the content per se and its audience contribute to the value of its creativity.

The current research studies creativity as a meaning-making process through social interaction. Beyond understanding creativity through the lens of general online content consumers, findings of the current study also provided various avenues for future research. The first, further exploration can be made through studying individuals of various demographic profiles, such as performing a cross-culture comparison or including professionals who pursue content creation as a full-time career. In addition, a comparison between the forming process of creativity through offline and online content consumption can also be an intriguing topic. The current study proposes the idea of how creativity research can be performed through a qualitative approach and how creativity should be studied as a continual process. Nonetheless, this is just the first step of a long journey to disclose the complexity of creativity, its meaning in our societies, and our experience with creative content.

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